THE COLOURFUL BEAD NECKLACE OF MY MOTHER TONGUE

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Learning Maasai, for me, has been a lifetime effort of delicately, haltingly, joyfully, and painfully stringing words together like beads, to form a beautifully coloured Maasai language necklace, which I now boastfully display, and protectively call 'my mother tongue'.

CHAPTER ONE

SIYIAPEI

I never really knew the origin of its name, but Siyiapei, the little village just seven kilometres before Narok Town on your way to the Maasai Mara Game Reserve, held a special and large spot of affection in my soul. Bubbles of anticipation and joy would brim over my heart and spill into the rest of my being each time I eagerly tumbled out of a *Matatu,* the fourteen-seater public vehicle that I often rode for three or more hours depending on where I was coming from. I would then walk up the road leading up to Siyiapei, where I would spend my four-week school holidays with my grandmother and other relatives I loved dearly. Holidays that would whiz by too fast, as this was the most constant of my many homes. This is where I learned who I was through the language I spoke.

Depending on where my parents lived, I could enter Siyiapei from the lush green, cold tea plantations of Kericho Town where I attended my nursery school, or from the dusty, hot and hazy tarmac roads of Nakuru Town where I spent the first half of my primary school years, or even from the dizzying hussle and bussle of the Capital Nairobi where I spent the rest of primary, high-school and university years. Different as the starting points were, the final location – Siyapei – remained constant in its affections for me over the decades. It's warm and welcoming embrace made it my *enkang'*; a home like no other. It is here that I felt I truly belonged, where despite my adulterated and unfamiliar grasp of the Maa language, I still felt I was part of the fabric, the sights, the smells, the sounds, and the beautiful people; this is where my *Maa* family was.

The landscape around Siyiapei was sometimes dry-crusty beige during the dry seasons, which could be long and stifling, with the wind whipping up dust devils at a whim. The merciless cloud of *enterit* would swirl up from one's tired feet and pile up on one's eyelashes and hair so that one ultimately looked like a white ghost by the time they reached their *enkang'*. This hot season could be long and draining and at such times one would wonder whether a Maasai could ever get any agricultural produce from the stubbornly unproductive crust beneath one's feet. Other times, Siyiapei would be generously speckled with dew-laden shrubs below a green canopy of innumerable acacia trees after a rainy spell.

Once I arrived at the small seasonal stream that trickled below Siyiapei village, I would skip out of the *matatu* I had picked from wherever we lived at the time, and stride confidently up the steep and rugged hill on the opposite side of the road, that led to Siyiapei village. I would first see the Siyiapei Medical Dispensary, a landmark that has withstood the tests of time in the area, and helped birth hundreds of Maasai babies from the surrounding homesteads in and around Siyiapei. The dispensary sat alongside the only Africa Inland Church that many a missionary used as a base to blaze the trail for Christianity in Maasai country, before and after Kenya's colonial era. A row of households whose walls were made of dung mixed with dry straw, sticks and mud, with corrugated iron sheeting for roofs, lined the road to the right, away from the dispensary and church. It was rare to espy the traditional Maasai *manyatta* (homestead) in the

Siyiapei area, as it was considered a more ‘progressive’ part of Maasai country. The fourth homestead on the right of winding path was a familiar sight - the *enkaji ole* Sempele (the Sempele family homestead), where the warm embrace of my grandmother Loise Sempele awaited my tired, dusty self, and the thought alone would quicken my weary steps, and broaden the dust-encrusted smile that broke on my excited face. Similarly constructed surrounding homes belonged to relatives and friends, and still stand there today.

Yeiyoo, *yeiyoo* (mother, mother) I would call as I flung myself through the old wooden door that served as the entrance to her home, as well as to her small shop from which she sold groceries to the small group of Siyiapei residents, many of whom were relatives. Wherever she was, she would turn her wide, plumb body towards me, swing her large arms wide open, and give me that smile that was worth a million goats, revealing a large gap between her two front teeth. The bear hug was to die for and always made the long and tiring journey to Siyiapei worth all the trouble. *Supa enkina ai* (hallo my little breast) she would say as she squeezed the life out of me and chuckled at the same time so that her laugh reverberated from her wide chest through mine as she lifted me slightly off my feet. *Iyeuwuo* (you have come?) *woi ashe enkAi* (thank you God!). She would peer into my face as if to make utterly sure it was well and truly me and hug me anew with more force so we would almost fall backwards to the ground in excitement. *Ashe Na’ai* (thank you God).

It never seemed odd to me that I called her *Yeiyoo* for mother intead of *kokoo* for grandmother. And this is what we all called her, so the title stuck. It is in Siyiapei that slowly, and sometimes elusively, I picked up one Maa word at a time and formed a beautiful language necklace that I wear with pride today, as it gives me identity as a Maasai woman.

CHAPTER TWO

THE VILLAGE CHILD AND THE WHIP

As with most Kenyan children, I was grudgingly poly-lingual. It was the only way to survive and to successfully negotiate diverse landscapes one moved through, that were populated by various ethnic groups. For example in a single urban household, a child stepped back and forth through different language spaces to seamlessly switch between English with the visitors, Kiswahili with the house-help, and Maasai with a birth-parent. So, when I lived with my parents in Kericho, I learned to pipe out *achamugee mising* in greeting, to the mostly Kalenjin population, and *habari yako* in Kiswahili, to other passersby who were obviously involuntary migrants like me, and *hallo* to those who looked more educated. When I was in Siyiapei, I smiled shyly and bent my head in respect to greet those my mother's age and above, saying *ng'asak*, a prompt for the older person to pat my head gently and greet me saying *supa nakerai* (how are you child/young one). I would softly respond with my gaze politely fixed on the ground before me *epa* (fine thank you) and skip off to whatever was supposed to be keeping me busy if they had no other questions to ask me, or errands to send me to. Looking at an older person straight in the eye was considered rude.

Unlike the independent generation of children today, a child belonged to the whole village and was there at the beck and call of all parents - birth parents or not. *Shomo* (go), *wou* (come), *Iyau* (bring), *iwa* (take) were words we became familiar with as the older generation bid us to come and go as they pleased, and we dared not disobey but jumped up and responded to their requests quickly, otherwise, we would not only be frowned upon, but with a quick click of the tongue, an angry parent could pinch you expertly and repeatedly under your thighs, an unwelcome move that sent lighting rods of pain through your tiny being. Or they could turn to the nearest tree or bush and grab an *enchipishipi*, which was a long, supple twig spliced expertly off in an instant of indignant fury, and its lithe length used to whip you smartly on your small backside. The *enchipishipi* would let off a *shipi shipi* sound as it spliced the air and landed on your smarting skin. With the free hand, the offended parent would grab you tightly by your bony little bicep and speak to you in an angry high-pitched tone, and in a rhythm that matched that of the *enchipishipi* as it landed on your chafing skin. 'K*e-nyoo-ina-modai*' (what-is-this-foolish-ness?), '*ke-neng'-ai-ena-kerai*?' (Whose-child-is-this?), whip-whip-whip-whip, '*ai-rriwuaa-niking'as-ai-ng'ode*? (I-send-you-and-you-first-stare-rudely-at-me?) As the *enchipishipi* landed, a child would twist and turn from side to side trying to escape its serpentine length and sting, while wailing loud and long and at the same time begging for mercy. *Waai waai, aatasaiya, aatasaiya* (Waah! Waah! I beg you, I beg you). Often, equally culpable age-mates quickly scuttled to a safe distance, and peered at the wretched victim over their palms as they covered their mouths so that their tense giggles could be stifled. They waited expectantly for the parent's anger to ebb as quickly as it had been sparked.

Interestingly, as children, we took this as the norm; never once imagining that we would tell on the parent who whipped us to our own. In fact, doing this would call for a second whipping as there was an unspoken bond between all parents to discipline children in the village if they

misbehaved. It was the responsibility of all *intoiwo* to make sure that *inkera* were disciplined; *inkera* belonged to the whole community. Sometimes, the offended parent would send a child to look for a suitable *enchipishipi*, and woe to you if you brought one that was not supple enough to go *shipi shipi* each time it flew towards your squirming body to cause the intended pain. An inadequate *enchipishipi* would simply add to the parent's chagrin, and after whipping you thoroughly with the first displeasing *enchipishipi*, they would send you for another one. It was safer to pick one that was up to standard the first time around; we learned this lesson very quickly.

Despite these incidences, children played about happily around the *enkang'* when there were no chores to do, and felt increasingly secure and loved by the *yeiyoos* (mothers) and *papaais* (fathers) in the village. The security of any child was the responsibility of all *intoiwo* in the village as well, and it was common for a parent to stop a wandering child and ask *kaji iloito* (where are you going?), or why are you alone? Where are the others? And whatever else they wanted to make sure that you were safe and that all was well. A crying child could also seek comfort in the arms of the nearest *yeiyoo* and tell what was ailing it without shame. I remember being comforted by the nearest *yeiyoo*, and often she would say *keinyoo* (what is it?) as she pulled me to her chest, and if it was a toe I had painfully stubbed on the ground, I would say *ene ene* (here, here) pointing to the hurt limb while wailing loudly, and she would lift my foot so that the toe was closer to her bent frame, and blow gently with her mouth on the hurt toe saying *baas baas mintoki aishirr* (ok, ok, stop crying now), and then she would frown fiercely at the ground, and stomp hard and fast on its crusty surface so that puffs of dust rose into the air, saying *Weh! Weh! Shomo* pii! (You, you, get lost!) This way, I would be comforted that the ground had been sufficiently punished because it had hurt my toe, and I would stop crying.

CHAPTER THREE

MAASAI CREAMY YOGHURT

As one must find a *sari* in an Indian home, a *mezuzah* in a Jewish home, and a whistling tea-pot in a typical English homestead, one must find *inkukurto* (milk gourds) in a typical Maasai homestead, in which to preserve the *kule naaoto* (Maasai yoghurt). A Maasai home is just not complete without these elongated brown gourds that my grandmother would pick off the vines in the surrounding thickets, or purchase from the markets in Narok town.

Whether a Maasai family lives in a rectangular dome made of cow-dung, mud and dry sticks – a Manyatta -, or in a square-shaped more modern structure with four walls made of the same material, or a home built using concrete blocks and topped by a corrugated iron roof, the *inkukurto* are a familiar and expected sight. There are often two or three hung on different walls. They have a familiar shape: a gourd that is long and somewhat cylindrical and wider at the base, tapering to a slimmer top section, and decorated with leather straps and beads. They are hung by the leather straps on iron nails stuck into the dry mud walls. One gourd could last a whole lifetime without getting damaged, and it was traditionally used to preserve milk for consumption, by Maasai nomadic families who wanted to preserve milk to drink as fermented milk over a long period of time.

When the Maasai moved from place to place looking for pasture on which their precious *inkishu* could feed, they needed to be sure to preserve milk and meat in creative ways so as to feed their families while on the move. *Enkai* forbid that a Maasai would throw out any excess *kule* once a cow had been milked! It was anathema! Instead, any extra fresh *kule* was poured into *inkukurto* that had been treated with smoking embers from *Osenetoi* or *Oloirien*, a tree whose chemical make-up ensured that powder from embers made from it preserved milk and enabled quick curdling into *kule naaoto* (Maasai thick creamy yoghurt). The aroma itself, of this fermented creamy youghurt, could drive any hungry Maasai child crazy with longing.

If my grandmother did not buy the *enkukurto*, she would lob off the top of one freshly plucked off the vines around the village, and literally disembowel it by firmly scooping out its insides – the seeds and spongy lining – and peer into it from time to time to make sure the sides of the gourd on the inside were smooth and that it was totally empty. She would twist the *enkukurto* towards the sun rays and peer into its dark cavern with one eye when she was checking to make sure she had scooped everything out of it to make space for the milk.

I loved to watch my grandmother prepare the *inkukurto* for *kule naoto* (Maasai Creamy Yoghurt). She would pick a few twigs of the *Osenetoi* tree, and let them burn slowly to dark, smoky embers. Then, with her strong fingers, she would crush them with a small pestle against a large stone, using quick, sharp, knocks, until the hot smoky embers were reduced to black powder. Her upper arms would bounce up and down and tighten rythmically every time she knocked at the embers. She would then quickly scoop up the hot black powder and throw it into the *enkukiri*, or into the *inkukurto* if she had more than one with she had cleaned out. She would

quickly cover the tops of the *inkukurto*, and hand me one to shake hard, as she shook the other. We would shake them vigorously so that the black powder evenly covered the inside surface of the *inkukurto*. She would then grab a bow-shaped twig that she hid in one of the corners of house and use if to grind the black powder against the inside of the *inkukurto* using a repeated circular motion. This ensured the inside of the *inkukurto* were completely covered with the black preservative powder, and any excess amount, she would instruct me '*imbukoi'* (pour that one out), which I promptly did.

Once the *inkukurto* had been treated with this powder, my grandmother would pick up a large *kobo* (mug) of fresh milk that she had placed on a small stool next to her, and slowly pour the warm, creamy liquid into the *inkukurto*. Sometimes, the *inkukurto* would be carried to where a cow was being milked and the women would milk directly into it, then firmly press on the lids and leave the *inkukurto* hanging on the manyatta walls for a number of days. Nature would then take its course.

In a few days' time, with the *inkukurto* firmly covered by a small top made of animal hide, or hard gourd material, the milk would coagulate and form thick, mouth-watering yoghurt tinted slightly grey by the black powder and saturated with an inebriatingly delicious scent of the *Osenetoi* tree. This was the ultimate flavoured Maasai Creamy Yoghurt that every child in the family longed to enjoy on a hot and sunny day when they were hungry and thirsty. There was nothing like the taste of the somewhat lumpy and oily sour cream, poured out into a large *kobo* (mug) and mixed with a little honey to sweeten it.

Once it had soured sufficiently, my *kokoo* (grandmother) would hold the lid of one *kukuri* tight with one hand, pressing it down as her other large palm held the base of the *kukuri* firmly, and then she would shake it vigourously to loosen and break the larger lumps of the coagulated milk and create thick porridge-like yoghurt. Her plump hips would shift rhythmically from side to side as well, due to the forceful nature with which she was shaking the *kukuri*, and it would look like she was doing a ritual dance. She would shift from one foot to the other as she did this, and if she didn't hold the lid tight enough, small spurts of the creamy, oily *kule naaoto*, would start spurting out from under the lid, and slowly slide down over her podgy fingers, due to the pressure caused by fermentation process. It was funny to watch her shake the *kukuri* and her large frame at the same time, and sometimes, she would peer at me with a cheeky glint in her large brown eyes and smile broadly as she swung from side to side, so that the beautiful space between her two front large teeth would show again. This *enchilaloi* was a mark of beauty among the Maasai, and I am told a smile that revealed it was enchanting to many a suitor in her time.

During such episodes, as I watched her plump cheeks jump up and down slightly from the exertion of cleaning out and treating the gourds, as well as when she was shaking the creamy, sour yoghurt before serving it into the *kobo*, I would pick up a few more colourful beads of the Maasai tongue: *mbung'a* (hold this), *tipising'a* (cover it), *tooko* (drink it), *tiika* (hang it), *tamejo* (lick it), and my tongue became more and more flexible as it manouvred around the different words and intonations of this beautiful language necklace.

When the milk had been shaken enough, *Yeiyoo* would call all the children nearby and serve the thick, creamy Maasai yoghurt into small *kobos* for every child. With or without honey it was delicious! We chuckled and gobbled the thick delicacy, and to ensure that none of it was wasted, each child would stick a finger into the *kobo* and expertly run it over the sides of the *kobo* and then lick the finger. This we did repeatedly until not a drop of *kule naaoto* was left in the *kobo*.

CHAPTER FOUR

TAKE IT LIKE A MAN AND OTHER GAMES

Children, no matter how we try and keep them busy, will always find a way to explore and be naughty. It was no different with the children in Siyiapei.

And busy a child in Siyiapei could be! As soon as we were dexterous enough to hold a cup or plate without dropping it, we could be sent by any older *Yeiyoo* or *Papaai* to fetch this, clean that, carry that, and do any other this or that.

From as young as five years old, a Maasai boy or girl would begin to take up responsibilities such as *aalo shoo* (take the cows to pasture), *aaorr enkaji* (sweep the Manyatta), *aayerr shai* (cook tea), *aaisuj imotiook* (wash the pots), *aalep intare* (milk the goats) and *aaoku enkare* (fetch water) and *aakut enkima* (to blow the fire so it increases), at different times of the day. It was this community effort that helped Maasai families cope with the rigours of each passing day. Children grew up knowing they made up an integral part of household labour.

Despite this rigourous schedule of household chores that sometimes demanded more than our tiny bodies could bare, my cousins and I would often time to escape to the nearby fields and get up to some mischief. We would play a variety of games and it mattered less whether it was with boys or girls. What united us was that we had all found a way of sneaking away from the endless ‘fetch this’ and ‘clean that’.

Some of the games were innocent and tonnes of fun. We would pluck wild, yellow tomatoes off the shrubs around us for example, and use them as missiles aimed at different targets, to see who was best at hitting them. Some of the young boys were experts at hitting a target no matter how far it was, and the yellow tomatoes would whiz through the air at such high velocity that they would make a frightening whoosh sound as they flew past your head. They would hit the target with such power that the tomato would splatter a bright yellow porridge all over the target. Woe to any child whose head was in the way as not only was it painful when the yellow tomato splattered on your scalp, it also caused an itch that drove many a child to desperate tears. One would scratch the *elukunyia* until it bled. The shooter would often shout *iwang’a iwang’a maanang’* (move, move so I don’t hit you) as he pitched the yellow tomatoes as an expert cricket player would towards an agreed target.

Other times we would all stand in a line, and one of the older boys, would go a few steps ahead and draw a line across the dusty earth, to indicate how far we all had to spit. The child who could spit over the drawn line without moving forward was the winner. Some of us would fix our eyes determinedly on a spot past the line, but when we tried to spit, the saliva would simply dribble down our chins and make all the other children double over in squeals of laughter. There were some boys and girls however, who would spit one straight jet of saliva way over the line without as much as a struggle, and as soon as they did this, they would raise two skinny hands up into the air in triumph as the other children clapped excitedly and gawked at them in awe. It was as if

they had a secret power hose hidden in their mouths that helped them do this better than the rest of us!
Sometimes, we would all race down a muddy hill during the rainy season and plunk down on our backsides once we had gained momentum so that we could slide down by using inertia, way down to the bottom of the hill while seated. At such a fast pace, some of us would end up flipping up into the air to fall back down on our stomachs or backs and slide down the rest of the hill in this contorted fashion, squealing in delight. Were one of us unfortunate enough to flip into the green shrubby bushes along the muddy track as we slid down the muddy slope, we all prayed our skinny frames did not flip onto a lush green bed of *entamejoi* (the licking one), a bed of tongue- shaped leaves that were slightly hairy just like the human tongue. The *entamejoi* would lick the skin that touched it and that part would immediately flare up with the most painful rash, which would swell and remain painfully itchy for some hours. The only medicine that could reduce the pain, based on the advice of the ever-wise older children, was to pinch your two nostrils together and squeeze out as much mucus from your tiny nose as possible and lather it against the smarting rash. The pain the *entamejoi* caused often led to tears and mucus running down the nose anyway, so the traditional medication was easy to come by at that point.

Often we went home with two glaring holes in the backs of our dresses or shorts from the friction of the slide down, and we would be caked with *esarng'ab* (mud) all over our exhausted and wet bodies. We inevitably got a whipping once we got home if we did not manage to sneak in unnoticed. Otherwise, to avoid the *enchipishipi* we sometimes decided to slide down the slopes totally naked with our clothes strewn on different bushes close to the village stream, and after the stolen bread of slippery-slope-adventure, we would all plunge into the village river and wash off the tell-tale mud cakes. We would then drape on our clean clothes and trek into our different homes with no *yeiyoo* the wiser regarding our naughty exploits. I look back and wonder at our innocence as children, as not even one child noticed that the other was naked when we took all our clothes off for the mud slide. All focus was on the fun in the slither down the slippery muddy slope and the much laughter that bubbled and burst forth from our excited hearts.

The dry savannah landscape sometimes attracted snakes and as children, when one of us espied *olasurai*, we would all run to a safe distance away from its slithering length. Sometime *olasurai* was green like the grass during the rainy season and this made it stand out with its starkly different shade from the crusty brown-beige earth beneath it during drought. Other times *olasurai* was hard to spot even by the keenest eye, as it would be as brown as the earth, and it would slither slowly over the dusty surface looking for a cool rock to hide under. My heart would beat incessantly from fear as I stared at its beady eyes, as I am sure would all the other little hearts around me, but we all knew what the secret was when we saw *olasurai*. We had learned from an early age that if one saw an *olasurai*, each of us only needed to grab hold of one of our wrists really tight with one hand; so tight that the blood stopped flowing through our tiny frightened veins, and our pulse would screech to an alarmed halt. This way, we had been told by the older children, the *olasurai* would also stop dead in its tracks, just like the red *osarge* that had stopped moving in our veins. We had been told that the *osarge* in our veins only stopped if we also stood perfectly still and did not even blink, and only if we squeezed our wrists really tight. I was always amazed that when we all stood like statues in different positions safely away from

the *olasurai*, and squeezed our wrists in the manner we had been instructed, the *olasurai* actually also stopped as if in some sort of astonishment. This is when the older boys would pick stones quickly and stone it to death, or scare it away from us. What magic! I smile to myself now when I am older as I realize that standing completely still when we saw *olasurai* is probably what often saved our inquisitive lives.

While some of the games were innocent and safe, others were quite dangerous. One of these dangerous games included lighting a fire, away from the sharp eyes of any caregiver, and picking up the glowing red embers in our small fingers, then pressing the ember against the skin on the top part of our thighs. The child who would 'take it like a man' and hold the burning ember longest against the sizzling, roasting skin of their thigh, without crying out from pain, would be the bravest of them all. Girls and boys would compete to see who would hold the burning ember longest against the smarting skin, without crying. We would all try and 'take it like a man'. As the red hot ember pressed against the tender surface of our thighs, the excited brood of children would press closer around the competitor, chanting '*ting'iria* (bear it) *ting'iria* (bear it) *ting'iria* (bear it) to a regular clapping rhythm, and the child with the red hot ember pressed against their roasting skin would increasingly widen their bright eyes from the pain, and even make a fist with the free hand as if this would help them bear the excruciating heat more without crying. Taking-it-like-a-man meant holding the hot ember for the longest time against your bleeding, sizzling, and charred thigh without even one teardrop running down your cheeks.

The ember would come off with a little bit of skin each time it was finally lifted off the burnt thigh. So, even today, if one were to flip up the trouser legs of men, and the skirts of women who had grown up in Siyiapei village, one would surely find small round *ilkiperrat* (tattoos), a number of circular scars running up the thighs from the knees, hidden carefully from curious eyes. This is what the sizzling hot embers pressed against their skin when they were young left as a reminder of Siyiapei village.

The blisters that formed from the cooked skin took some time to heal but we would be careful to cover the seared blisters carefully when in the presence of *Yeiyoo* once we returned to the home at dusk. If we failed to hide the scars, the whipping we would endure for this dangerous misdemeanour would be a thousand times more painful than the hot embers we bore earlier on our tender thighs.

CHAPTER FIVE

IN THE FIRELIGHT

Life was simple in Siyiapei. A broom was often created when it was needed, simply by snapping leafy twigs off the shrubs around us and tying them together at one end. This formed a thick leafy broom that we then used to sweep the earthen floors with. Despite the fact that the floors were not covered with cement, or parquets or anything, we still strove to keep the dust levels down by making sure that we sprinkled water over the earth, and swept the ground lightly with eucalyptus twigs that left their scent hovering in the air for the most part of the day, and also kept the dust levels down.

Most Maasais knew of indigenous medicinal leaves, roots and herbs by name and almost every ailment could be treated without as much as stepping out of the homestead, through the use of natural remedies. I was always amazed at the magic a simple massage worked when one had a stomach ache. As a child, I would often go sniffling to *yeiyoo* when my stomach hurt as I was confident she would know exactly what to do. She would pull me close and soothe my whining with a few words of comfort, and then she would direct me to a nearby bed and ask me to lie down. She would then reach for some cream or cooking fat and lather this on my tummy. She would then begin to massage my aching *enkoshoke* in firm circular motions, with her strong fingers. It would not take long before I dozed off from the soothing pressure of her plump, wide palms pressing on my aching tummy. When I awoke, all the stomach pain was always gone, as if by magic.

There was also no electricity in Siyiapei and at night, the *ilakerr* filled the night sky above and twinkled merrily down at us. The moon shone bright as well as it had no competition from artificial neon lights. Most houses had small tins that were filled with kerosene. The top section of the tin would be split in the middle and a cloth wick would be passed through it and dipped into the kerosene. This is the wick that we would light and use as a candle, commonly called a *koroboi* or *tililamp*. It is many years later that some affluent homes in the village now have electricity.

As children, we confidently ventured out onto familiar paths to the neighbouring warm hearths without worrying the slightest about possible kidnapping or abuse. We relied on the lights from the *ilakerr* and the *olapa* to light up the winding and dusty paths before us.

As the evening hours drew near, most Maasai homes would be shrouded in darkness, except for a central point in kitchen where a fire would be lit. Sparks would often fly from the fire like firecrackers and land on our bare calves and thighs. The sharp twinge of pain from the spark's heat would not last long, but they would leave a small white marked called *intibil* on the skin, and these small white freckles would often last for life as a reminder of all the fireplaces we huddled around in Siyiapei. Family members would huddle with their backs to the outside cold and the foreboding sounds of whooping hyenas and chirping crickets, to warm their bodies by the fire. The three stones that made up the fireplace looked like three old men, seated facing

each other, in some sort of séance. There was a grey-black spot between the three stones created by the many fires that had been lit there over the years. The three-old-men stones had served to support the blackened pots and pans that *yeiyoo* had used to prepare succulent meals for her family and myriad visitors on a daily basis, and over many years.

This is the time I enjoyed the most after a tiring day of carrying out what seemed like a million chores. Children would press in between the spaces where older members of the family sat on stools. Their little bodies would take in the heat of the warming earth as they looked up into the faces of friends and family. This is also the time that visitors would pop into different homes to share a meal or share what was on the village grapevine. It is also a time when family members would sing traditional and Christian songs, and tell spine-chilling and humourous fables passed down through the generations. Every story started with *netiapa* (once upon a time), and the audience would respond *eeh* (yes), which would urge the narrator on to tell the tale as he had been assured the audience was listening keenly and keeping pace with the plot.

It is at such times that I picked up the greatest repertoire of colourful language beads as I listened to the stories about the *olng'ojiniak* hyena) that smelt a delicious meal up ahead but couldn't make up its mind which path to take to reach what was letting off this tantalizing aroma. It decided it would try and use both paths just so it would not lose out on this delicious meal whose scent it had picked up with its sharp sense of smell. So the *olng'ojine* would plunk two feet on one path and two on the other. The paths became wider and wider apart, but even though the hyena was becoming increasingly uncomfortable as it stretched its feet wider and wider apart, greed kept it moving in this fashion. The *olg'ojine* was afraid that if it chose only one path, it might not be the path that would take it to the dizzyingly sweet aroma he could sniff was ahead somewhere. The hyena therefore kept moving forward in this undecided manner spurred by greed, until it split into two and died before it could get to the meal. The moral of the story was that little children should be careful not to be so greedy as to want everything, as they might inevitably lose it all. Stories were always narrated in order to teach especially children some moral for living.

There were also variations of ogre stories that sent chills down our small spines. The ogres always had only one eye, and stories were told of an ogre that would sneak into villages and steal *inkera* who were disobedient to their parents. The narrator of the story would take advantage of the dark to make fearful sounds and gestures to spice up his tale, and children would huddle closer to the fire, and peep furtively over their shoulders into the darkness behind them for fear the ogre might have sneaked up on them. We were never completely quiet as one would be quiet for example when watching a movie on TV. Stories were told for all to participate, in making it all the more interesting. Sometimes, the narrator would expect responses such as *eeeeh* (yes) or *a-a* (no) from the audience. Sometimes, we would sing along with the characters in some story, or react by clapping our hands together in glee or shock depending on what bend the story had taken. Being an active audience is what brought the stories to life and made them so enjoyable.

It is here that I learnt the high-pitched Maasai songs and the swaying movement of the neck, slightly back and then slightly forth, so that *yeiyoo* looked like her neck worked independently

from the rest of her body, to move rhythmically and hypnotically to different tunes. Most chorouses in the stories told, or songs sung, required a soloist and a rythmical response from the huddled listeners.

Sharing *isinkolioitin* (songs) together in this way created a strong bond of love and friendship between those present, and after a tiring day, it had a therapeutic effect of relaxation and healing before bed. Laughter rubbed off the fatigue and frustration of everyday tasks, and songs helped lull children to sleep. The fireplace was a place for telling stories, updating on breaking news, singing songs, and playing games, which was so much more entertaining than the passive blue light of the computer and TV screens of today's era.

I remember one particular game we played that added a string of colourful beads of Maasai vocabulary to my language learning. It was called *tooko kule e'nkiteng'* (drink the milk of a cow).

We played this often as children, together with adults when some amiable wind touched them, especially when waiting for food to cook in the evening. We would huddle around the flickering flames of the three-old-men fire, which at this time was more welcoming than the ominous sounds of the darkening night outside the homestead. This game was particularly valuable for young children whose tongues were still floundering over Maasai vocabulary.

In this game, one player held the wrist of another player with one hand, and shook it slowly up and down, so that the wrist bobbed loosely up and down repeatedly. One was encouraged to keep it loose and totally relax. The player holding the wrist would then say *tooko kule e'nkiteng'*, *tooko kule e'nkiteng'* (drink the milk of a cow, drink the milk of a cow). Each bob meant that the one, whose wrist was bobbing up and down, was drinking one mug of delicious cow's milk at a time. Because Maasai love milk, whether fresh or fermented, it was in a players' interest to drink as many mugs of cow's milk as possible, so they let the wrist bob up and down loosely without tightening, as a tight fist indicated that the person was refusing to drink a mug of cow's milk.

The aim of the game was for the wrist-holder to seamlessly shift from speaking of cow's milk to mentioning other types of milk that a Maasai considered anathema to drink, and hope that the other player whose wrist was being bobbed up and down, would not notice the change and keep his wrist loose, so that he could swallow as many mugs of disgusting milk options. If the player whose wrist was held sensed there was going to be a change in the milk mugs being offered, he would quickly make a tight fist, indicating that he has refused to drink that particular type of milk.

So, as the game ensued, the wrist-holder would say, *tooko kule e'nkiteng'* (drink cow's milk) several times, and quickly change to *tooko kule oldia* (drink dog's milk), *tooko kule osikiria* (drink donkey's milk), *tooko kule olasurai* (drink snake milk) and if the other player was not paying close attention, it meant that he was drinking mugs of these disgusting and undrinkable milk options. If however, he was alert, he would tighten his fist before the word *oldia*, *osikiria*,

or *olasurai* was said. Those listening would laugh long and hard at a child who ended up drinking snake, dog or donkey milk instead of cow milk. Quickly tightening one's fist was the same as turning the milk tap off and refusing to drink the offending milk. The players would take turns having their wrists held and bobbed up and down, and the idea was to see who would be alert enough to ensure they only drank the delicious creamy *kule* of *enkiteng'* and no other type of milk. This game enabled children to pick up many new words, as milk mugs of *empuus* (cats), *oltome* (elephants), *enkurwe* (pigs), *ndero* (rats), and so forth were offered.

As children, we would double over with laughter when it would dawn on us that in a moment of distractedness, we had been guzzling goblets of dog or snake milk, instead of cow milk.

CHAPTER SIX

THE MILKING SAGA

The Maasai woman of any home would confidently stride to her cow-shed, by a well-trodden path, to expertly but lovingly squeeze the pregnant cow teats of her cherished cows, for the daily ration of *kule* that would be consumed in the home.

Sometimes, I would follow my older cousin in the early dawn down this dewy path, and crouch a small distance behind her to watch the milking process over her slim, bent shoulders. She carried with her a small wooden stool and a tin container into which the milk would squirt from the heavy teats attached to large pink and veined udders of the cow. She would settle herself comfortably, slightly to the left of the large hind quarters of the cow she was about to milk. The cow's large head would swivel slowly to the left at the sound of her, and momentarily, the large, black eyes would peer at her, as if to make sure this was a familiar face. Silent permission would then be granted and my cousin would tuck her head into the cow's smooth large flank and reach under its huge middle to grasp the teats with her strong fingers. First she washed them with a little warm water she had carried in the container. The warmth would bring about the let-down of *kule*, and my cousin would then pull the full teats rhythmically towards the container that sat on the dungy earth beneath. To make her work easier, and safer, my cousin would also generously smear her strong fingers with thick lard to ensure quick milking and that she did not cause the cow unnecessary discomfort.

In most cases, the relationship between the cow and its milker was a warm and affectionate one, and a cow that gave a lot of milk was given a special name in return, such as *kirotet* (my favourite one), *kanusu* (my gentle quiet one), *pukoret* (the one that feeds the family), *ng'aruani* (the cow that has abundant milk), and each name bespoke a long-term friendship and interdependence between milker and milk-provider.

From my safe vantage point, I would peer in the duo's direction. As the morning light increased, my eyes would outline the long swishing tail of the cow to its bushy, fluffy tip, and then let my eyes travel down its muscular hind legs to its powerful dark hooves. Horror stories did their rounds in Siyiapei village on how easily and quickly those hard hooves could shoot out, and dislocate the milker's jaw if the milking exercise went awry.

Despite an endearing relationship between a Maasai woman and her cow, for no apparent reason, or because of some sore on some teat that the milker hurt accidentally, a cow could in one horrific instant of angst shoot out with a hoof and kick its milker wherever its powerful hoof could land. This explosive move of solid brute force could be lethal, or crack a couple of ribs, or maim for life.

An acute awareness of this possibility led many women to sing softly to the cow when milking, to calm it down. My cousin would do this often and her lilting high voice and beautiful melody would lift the morning fog off our shoulders. The rhythm matched the timing of the squirts and

swooshes of the milk as it jetted into the container. Often, the cow would settle down to calmly feed off a pile of hay as a result of the soft singing, allowing my cousin to safely fill the container with frothy, creamy *kule*. This soothing tune seemed to create a bond of understanding and calm that enveloped the duo, and kept the cow still for milking. With time, the layer of froth climbed slowly up the container until its rim. My cousin would finally lift the full container gingerly and carry it to the now clearly visible homestead.

Once inside, she would grab a small metal spoon from the clean kitchen utensils placed inside a long plastic container by the wall, and expertly skim off the thick top layer of cream from the *kule*, and slap it into a small pot nearby. She did this each morning and evening when she milked the cow, such that the small *moti* (pot) was almost full with part fresh whitish cream, and part solidified and sour yellowy-beige cream from many days of milking. I noted that the small *moti* was almost full and I knew that all the children in the homestead were already drooling from what they knew was about to happen.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CRUNCHY CRUMBS OF CREAM

As children, we would wait eagerly over the weeks as the small *moti* would slowly fill with the *ng'orno*. The closer the *ng'orno* got to the surface, the closer we were to savouring the sumptuous crunchy crumbs of cream called *enkukunyet*. Even today, over 40 years later, as I think of *enkukunyet*, the brown, crumbly crunchy residue of fried cream, my mouth waters. Yes, fried cow's cream. It is amazing the delicacies that a Maasai woman could create from milk. This delicacy would be made from the cream that had collected over time in the *moti*. What the world shuns today for fear of cholesterol, young Maasai children used to drool and beg for.

On that glorious day, when the small *moti* would be full, even the *yeiyoo* of the homestead could sense the palpable anticipation of all children, who would find any excuse to enter the kitchen to espy what may be on the three-old-men stone fire. Wide expectant eyes trained her every movement. Joy unspeakable would resonate through the gaggle of children when at last they saw her pick the now heavy-laden *moti*, tuck it under her slim bicep, and place it next to the fireplace.

Yeiyoo would grab a small *moti* and place it on a low fire she had lit earlier. Into it, she would scoop the thick globs of creamy-yellow, solidified *eng'orno* from the container into the quickly warming *moti*. She controlled the flames that rose from the burning sticks between the three-old-men stones, as the yellow flames licked the blackened base of the tin *moti*.

As the globs of *eng'orno* fell onto the heating base of the *moti*, they would swirl in a slow dance around its silver interior, and melt into a golden ghee, whose toffee-like aroma would engulf the small kitchen. Glob after glob she would carefully scrape out of the container and add to the now warm swirl of ghee in the *moti*. The upper layers of the *eng'orno* in the container were off-white in colour and soft, but as she dug deeper into the lower layers that had been pressed down over the weeks, the *eng'orno* was hard and yellow-brown in colour. For the lower layers, *Yeiyoo* would use more force to scoop out the contents of the container, until her smooth glowing face would break into small beads of sweat, and she would puff slightly from the effort.

The flames continued to lick at the blackened, warming *moti*, and the globs all slowly melted until there was nothing more to scoop out of the container and add to the warm ghee. To manage the heat so that it was not too hot for the *eng'orno*, *Yeiyoo* would remove or add small sticks to the fire. If the fire was too high, it would spoil what we had all been waiting for these past weeks, the making of the *enkukunyet* (crunchy crumbs of fried cream).

By now, it seemed that the aroma of the slowly melting *eng'orno* had drawn almost every child in Siyapei into the now congested kitchen. Interestingly, I do not recall ever begrudging the number of children present for fear of having to share the *enkukunyet* with so many mouths. It seemed always that the more children there were in our home, the more adventurous and merry life seemed. We would all squeeze into whatever space was available and stare into the hypnotizing swirl of golden ghee, which the large globs of *eng'orno* had turned into. Our noses

would twitch, and our mouths would water. Our main concern was the now, slowly increasing layer of dark-brown residue that seemed to be building up at the base of the shiny *moti*. This is where every child's eye-ball was fixed. This build-up of fried cream residue was what we were all waiting for as the kitchen interior became satiated with the sweet aroma of the toffee-like scent of *enkukunyiet*!

When the residue at the base of the pot was just short of black, *Yeiyoo* would expertly lift the scalding pot off the three-old-men fire, and quickly, but gently place it on the dusty ground next to her. She would slap off any knees or toes that were too close to the hot pot with a sharp en*tinyikai enchom idi*e (move over there). Which child would not quickly oblige when they knew it could lead to a delicious scoop of *enkukunyiet*!

We were forever amazed at *Yeiyoo's* ability to lift a red-hot metal pot off the fire with her bare hands without flinching from pain, or burning her fingers. It took growing older for us to realize that the tips of her *ilkimojik* had developed a callous layer of skin from repeated scalding. These pads eventually insulated her from feeling any pain at all from the pot's searing heat.

Yeiyoo moved methodically as she reached for the large metal-wire sieve that hung on a nail on one wall next to her and quickly poured the hot oil into an already cleaned tin at her feet. She let the hot, golden-brown oil run quickly into the tin, and then more slowly as the residue at the bottom of the *moti* got closer to its lip. She expertly prevented this residue from going through the sieve into the oil in the tin. At last! Two or three small cups of dark-brown, oily crumbs of the prized deep-fried cream now remained at the base of the *moti*.

After every possible drop of clean oil could be sieved out of the *moti*, *yeiyoo* quickly sprinkled some sugar over the *enkukunyet*, and scooped two or three spoons of the sweetened mix into an assemblage of small plates and mugs from her makeshift utensil cupboard, depending on how many children she had quickly surmised were squeezed into her kitchen. She handed the sweetened mix of crunchy cream crumbs of *enkukunyiet* to the outstretched dusty little hands, and adoring small faces. In the eyes of the gaggle of hungry children, *yeiyoo* had become like a goddess! As they munched on every enthralling scoop, the children jabbered at each other delightedly about everything and anything at once, as they smacked their oily lips together and crunched on the fried cream crumbs. They licked their oily sweet fingers from base to tip, and used them again to wipe off every single crumb from the plate or from inside the mug, so as not to waste nary a crumb of what they had waited for this long.

Sharing did not bother any child so much, although the stronger and bigger children often used their clout to hive off a larger share of everything when *yeiyoo* was not looking. But, it was rare for a child to have their own bed, clothes, shoes…leave alone eat food from their own plate in Siyapei, because there was always someone else around to share it with. I remember a 4x6 foot bed could hold up to six small children if family or friends visited for the night, three on each side of the bed, so if someone was watching from afar, he would see a head then feet, a head, then feet on both sides of the bed, and it was never considered a problem. In fact, it was a thrill to have visitors, as children would whisper jokes and tell funny stories to each other all night, and

finally nod off when their tongues were too tired to wag, and their eye-lids too heavy to remain open. So, sharing scoops of *enkukunyiet* from a small mug or plate was not surprising, as long as we all got to taste the delicacy.

It is in Siyapei that I learned that it was okay to cross from one manyatta or house to another at the oddest hours and confidently ask for *esukari* (sugar), *eilata* (oil for cooking or for the body), *shimpi* (salt), *ilnyanya* (tomatoes), *enkibiriti* (matches) when one needed to. There was even nothing odd about a visitor crossing over to the neighbour's house after eating, to spend the night there if their own house was filled to capacity.

I remember growing up making pot after pot of *shai* (teafrom the Kiswahili word *chai)*, which was made by brewing tea-leaves mixed in water and milk and sugar - all-together. It is only when I ventured outside Siyapei that I realized in most white people's homes *shai* was tea-leaves steeped in boiled water, with milk on the side, to be mixed by the drinker. This was unheard of as we grew up as we felt that the brewing of everything together to a thick broth is what made tea flavourful.

The morning ration of milk was therefore not only for family members to drink, but also for the young women, such as I, to brew endless cups of tea for the guests who arrived during the day. It was also unheard of to ask a visitor if they wanted food to eat or tea to drink. It was assumed that they would eat and drink in your homestead regardless of whether they had just come from filling their bellies elsewhere. It was better that a visitor politely refused to eat more, and even then, it was assumed you would continue to pester them slightly to eat of your food, and only if they insisted they just could not take any more would you be expected not to serve them anything.

So, a day was filled with rounds and rounds of bowing the head to politely let elders pat it and say *supa nakerai*, as well as cups and cups of tea, and plates and plates of whatever food was available, served to visitors who happened to pass by without notice.

It was through this incessant jabbering by delighted children as they scrambled for a share of the *enkukunyet*, and the welcoming of a string of visitors to a home that looked quite poor yet never seemed to run out of what to share, and the crossing between hearths to unapologetically borrow and generously lend, that I stringed together more colourful beads of my mother tongue, and the endearing norms of the Maasai.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SISAL BASKET AND THE DANCING WATER MAIDEN

I grew up and continued to interact with different members of Siyiapei village, when on holiday from school and even university. With time, engendered division of labour became clearer to me. Women and girls roused before dawn and until the late hours of night it seemed that they never stood still for all the chores they were expected to carry out. We fetched *enkare* from the river not too far from the homestead, swept the dust of the earthen floors, cooked for myriad visitors, milked the cows, patched up the holes in the mud-stick walls of the homestead when they started to leak, went to market when groceries were needed, washed clothes, fetched firewood, wove the baskets, and so much more, so that it seemed as if we all had four invisible hands and feet more than everyone else in the village.

Most homes in Siyiapei had a pit latrine and it was rare to find a home with an inside toilet, and very few floors were cemented. It was up to the *intoiyie* to keep these areas clean. In fact, even the colourful sisal baskets we carried to market from time to time, we made with our own hands, under the expert guidance of *Yeiyoo*.

We had been taught to cut off large sisal leaves from wild sisal plants that dotted the landscape. One had to be careful not to get scraped by the tiny triangular thorns along the sides of the flat fleshy leaves when cutting them. We scraped off these thorns from the sides of the leaves and then heaped the leaves into a corner until we had enough to make the threads for weaving our baskets.

Once we had sufficient piles of sisal leaves, we would pick them one by one and place them on a flat stone, upon which we would scrape off the green fleshy part of the leave and leave the wet long sisal threads. These we would then drape over the bushes nearby to dry out for a day or two. After drying, we would collect the threads and dye them using different colour petals from the wild flowers that dotted the landscape, and then let them dry anew.

To ensure the now coloured threads were just the right size, each girl would squat on the dusty ground and bare one thigh on which she would spread a layer of oil. She would then carefully spin the thread using her thigh as the spinning tool. She would do this by rolling the thread repeatedly from the top section of her thigh towards her knee until the sisal threads were thin and twisted. This is then what would be used for weaving the baskets. Doing this over many years caused one's thigh to become black and calloused, but it was not something we could avoid. It was a job that needed to be done. It is these colourful threads that we spun on our blackened, cracked thighs, which we then used to make the colourful baskets that hung in each home in Siyiapei.
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Fetching water from the nearby Siyiapei River was also an experience that tested our mettle as young *intoiyie*. The river was at the base of a small embankment about a hundred yards left of

our homestead. The most amazing aspect of this river was that it literally spurted out of a flat vertical wall from the embankment, and it was quite warm, as if it originated from the bowels of the earth. Every single day of the year, night and day, it would flow out generously for use by the villagers in Siyiapei. Half a century later, the Siyiapei River is still there and people from my village do not understand water shortage. With time, a small reservoir of water formed at the base of the embankment and banana plants and bamboo grew along its edges.

Fetching water was therefore girls' work and it was back-breaking but unavoidable. Every homestead in Siyiapei had about six bright-yellow 25-litre jerry cans stacked in some corner of the homestead. It is from these jerry cans that bathing, cooking, cleaning and drinking water was drawn, and it was up to us younger *intoiyie* and the older *inkitwaak* to ensure that that a few of the jerry cans were full of water throughout. Men had nothing to do with this task as far as I can recall.

As *intoiyie*, we therefore all had to learn early how to strategically tie a sisal rope around both sides of a jerry can so that when it was full of water, it would be carried lying horizontally across one's back, with a loop going round our foreheads. One would lean slightly forward once a jerry can was full of water in order to be able to carry it, with one hand holding onto a part of the sisal rope on each side of the head. A black screw-able stopper, or a maize husk without the grain, would be used as a lid to keep the water from leaking out of the jerry can.

Descending down the embankment to the *oreiyiet* was child's play and though the distance was short, as *intoiyie* we would take our time going to fetch water with our bright yellow jerry cans, as this was often an opportune moment to catch up on village gossip and stories of the latest village beau. The herculean task was coming back up the steep hill with the full jerry cans tied securely to our foreheads and lying horizontally across our backs.

Once we got to the never-ending spurt, we would flip the empty jerry cans to the ground and with a slight tilt begin to fill them with the clean, warm *enkare*. We stood barefooted in the warm water of the reservoir and tried to ensure that the jerry cans were full to the brim by tilting them more and more, and then finally knocking the stopper onto the top to seal in the water. Once filled, we would help each other lift the jerry cans and place them lying horizontal on our backs as we leaned forward at a 45 degree angle. We would then gingerly climb up the steep embankment to head back home.

It was at the top of the embankment that each young girl would stride purposefully towards her home, and it is at this point that I would often be found out for who I really was.

This is because as an inexperienced Maasai water-fetching maiden, who spent more and more of her growing life in urban centres and less fetching water in her home village, I would begin involuntarily to dance from one end of the dusty path to the other. This was to my utmost chagrin, and to the delight of my age mates who would dissolve into uncontrollable shrieks of laughter, as they had been waiting for this to happen all along. It often looked as if they would laugh so hard until they toppled over with their heavy yellow loads and spill all the water they

had struggled so hard to fetch. My laugh was loud and nervous as it was a means of covering my shame.

This is what made me to become known as the dancing water maiden of Siyiapei village. It revealed that my life in this wonderful part of the world was becoming increasingly intermittent as I grew older. This unwelcome wind of change was slowly wresting my beautiful coloured Maasai necklace of words and experiences from my faltering grasp, and I was losing my sense of belonging.

CHAPTER NINE

DESPERATE GRASP AT MY LANGUAGE BEADS

As I grew older, it is as though some invisible and unwelcome hand was stealing in from behind me to yank at my colourful language bead necklace away from my protective grasp.

Slowly by slowly, against my will, the beautiful words I had painstakingly put together over the years were slowly unraveling, and it was as if some devil whirlwind was whipping them away from me. The layers of innocence and naiveté in my eyes were also being peeled away as we moved and lived in different urban centres, and as I spent more and more time away from Siyiapei while in school and eventually at the university. So much about the life I loved in Siyiapei was becoming more remote and slightly odd when held against the fast-paced and more individualized canvas of the urban life I was immersed in. The distorted view most of those around me held of the beautiful indigenous peoples' lifestyles also crowded my thinking, and confused and bothered me.

In university for example, I became acutely aware of inequitable access to education by different ethnic groups in different parts of the country. In my three years of learning I did not find even one Maasai girl in the university corridors, dorms or classes to share my beloved language beads with. Many were the nights when, in the university dining hall, I would furtively wipe of a tear or two from my face, and swallow the tight ball of sadness in my throat, as I watched and listened to other young men and women chatter merrily in their mother tongue as they sat and ate in familiar clicks. These were the ethnic groups to which education was more accessible and affordable, and their numbers spoke loudly of this discrepancy.

I realized with increasing despair that young girls from Maasai counties faced a monumental minefield of obstacles in their elusive quest for education. I also became increasingly grateful for the fact that I had escaped the knife of female genital mutilation and forced early marriage that kept many of my compatriots from continuing with their education. Schools that one could speak of in our expansive semi-arid landscape were also few and far between, with limited academic resources to boast of, and even scarcer teachers, as many were unwilling to relocate and teach in these hardship areas. There was also the cultural preference to educate boys and marry off girls. It was believed that educating girls was a waste of time as they would eventually be married off anyway, and bride-price was considered more beneficial than spending an inordinate amount of hard-earned cash on taking a Maasai girl to school. Unbeknown to me, the young boys that we played *tooko kule enkiteng'* with, seared our thighs with red hot embers with, and slid down the muddy embankment with during the rainy season so that we had holes in the backs of our dresses and shorts, were now slightly different from their *intoiyie* friends. I reluctantly grasped the fact that in the ladder of Maasai society, when it came to societal benefits and decision making, men and boys were on the upper rungs, and women and girls often held the same position as cattle.

I could speak of only three male students who were my seniors during my years at the university, and sadly they seemed somewhat entrapped in the individualistic and heady rat race of urban life to bother too much with me. My loneliness was palpable, and even in the bustling streets of Nairobi, it seems that I could count off on one hand how many Maasais I met and spoke to in one year. Few of us had managed to squeeze through the unjust societal bottlenecks to get to education and work opportunities in urban centres.

The working world was hardly different. Even though we wore power suits, spoke the Queen’s English, and walked with the exaggerated swagger of newly employed graduates, I sorely missed the simple life of Siyiapei and the people I loved so much. In the cities, priorities had changed for many; a healthy bottom line and mastery of an exotic language were more important and the keys to survival. Gone was the crunchy brown *enkukunyiet*, the frothy warm *kule*, the thick sour *kule naaoto* from the gourds, and so much more that we had relished in our simple and beautiful lives in Siyiapei.

Sadly, even those couples that were both Maasai preferred to speak Kiswahili or English to their Maasai children in Nairobi, something that made their children feel they lacked self-satisfaction and belonging, as well as a sense of identity in society,. When I did hear of the Maasai in the news or elsewhere, it was only negative stories, not the wonderful experiences I knew of in Siyiapei. For example, I only heard of land-grabbing, ethnic clashes and. This made me feel misunderstood as a Maasai woman. I felt increasingly unsure about my purpose and future as my sense of belonging was eroded.

I noted with grim determination that if I wanted to keep my beautiful colourful language bead necklace intact, I would have to sneak away often from the blinding neon lights of the dizzying urban centres, and find my way back to the quieter moon-lit, dusty paths, sing more songs and tell more stories around the three-old-men fire, and gaze at the star-studded skies of my beloved Siyiapei as often as I could.

ENDS